

Sketch

Volume 17, Number 2

1950

Article 5

Vienna Bread

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Abstract

Pfc. Joseph Winters tossed restlessly in his bed as he awakened from his evening nap...

"This sort of thing bores me," said one. "I only come to please the wife."

"This man Bull, he should play for cows and goats," said the other.

Tears welled again into my Uncle Hjaalmar's eyes, but this time they were tears of anger. He dropped his coat upon the concert floor and gathered the two men to him in his blacksmith's arms of steel. His rage at these two who had profaned his idol consumed him. They were like two straw dolls. He smashed their faces together until they no longer had faces, dropped them, and stood stupidly as policemen surrounded him, too afraid for themselves to approach within reach of those awful arms.

My uncle Hjaalmar still lives in Norway. He sits alone in a room without furniture. He sits naked, listening always to the music of Ole Bull's violin. He has sat thus for half a lifetime.

Often, my father accuses me of having some of my uncle's taste for music. I know I have. I think there is some of my Uncle Hjaalmar in almost all men—and I thank God for it.

—Tom Blake Olsen, *Sci. Sr.*



VIENNA BREAD

PFC. JOSEPH WINTERS tossed restlessly in his bed as he awakened from his evening nap. He could hear talking and laughter coming from the Sergeant's room but as he strained to hear what was being said he only heard the laughter.

Joe thought to himself as he had thought very often recently, "What the Devil am I doing in this room? Why can't I wake up in the U.S.A. like I used to? The war's over—I want to go home!" Then he smiled as he thought of one of the recent army parodies to the tune, "Lili Marlene,"—"Dear Mr. Truman, why can't I go home? . . ."

The hands on his watch stood at seven forty-five and he watched the second hand jerk around the dial. "Won't do

any good to scratch those numbers off," Joe observed ironically, but he did get up to go scratch September 24, 1945, off the calendar.

He opened the door to the Sergeant's room.

"Hi ya, Joe, c'mon in, pull up a chair." The older experienced voice of Sergeant Blitsch spoke paternally.

Joe peered through the smoke and saw two of his other buddies in the room. The Sergeant and the other two were all in his squad, had been in his squad for the whole war. The conversation was easy to break into. "Well, what ya talkin' about—as usual?"

Sergeant Blitsch screwed his face in a puzzled look. "Why, Joseph, I don't know what you mean. We were talking about flowers—how to arrange flowers for afternoon teas." The Sergeant laughed much too long. The others laughed too.

The Sergeant continued. "Well, there's this flower up on Hernalser Strasze. She wasn't like the others—it took a whole carton of Chesterfields and a Ping candy bar before she started to act the way I wanted her to. Boys, I never missed that two-hundred smokes one bit—my God, what a woman!" The Sergeant's eyes twinkled meaningfully as he paused for effect.

Joe was listening attentively, but he felt a little embarrassed when they discussed this subject. He had respected the military opinions of the Sergeant—but about this?

A corporal, who was lying on the sofa with his boots propped against the wall, spoke, half derisively, "They can't hold down a good man, can they, Sarg?"

The Sergeant didn't answer that question, but he continued. "Boys, I'll let ya in on a little secret." His voice lowered. "I ain't found one yet that ain't got her price. Of course, ya gotta know how to pick 'em." The Sergeant was leaning back on his chair and he watched his toes wiggle in his stockinged feet. He took off one of his stockings and picked at the dirt between his toes.

The Corporal spoke again. "I think you had good luck, Sarg—I had one back in Salzburg—gave her everything except my G. I. helmet, but she wouldn't come across. All she could say was, 'Nichts gut!—Nichts gut!'"

Another soldier with a high-pitched voice squirmed nervously as he said, "Ya never know 'till ya try though, do ya Sarg?"

But the Sergeant didn't answer that question because they already knew the answer. He was a man of action. "Wine, Women and Song, boys, that's Vienna. I can't sing but I'm thirsty as Hell. Anybody want to go down to the 'Rainbow Club'?"

The soldier with the high-pitched voice answered quickly, "I do," and he darted out the door.

The Corporal, in silent agreement, took his feet down, leaving a black streak on the wall, and got up to go comb his hair.

"How about you, Joe?" the Sergeant addressed him warmly.

"Naw, thanks, I got some letters to write and I'm feeling a little bit tired tonight. Thanks anyway."

"Okay, it's up to you—every man to his own taste—that's what I've always said."

Joe walked slowly out of the Sergeant's room and back to his. He sat down at his desk and started a letter: Dear Dot, September 24 is just another day. The boys had another bull session tonight—.

Joe crumpled up the letter. "What does she care about all this tripe!—I wrote the same damn thing last letter!"

Joe got up and walked over to his drawer of rations; he counted the precious booty—nine boxes of K Rations, seven cartons of cigarettes, six candy bars, nine bars of soap, three cigars. "Can't do much good with those cigars."

II

Along Nuszdorfer Strasse there were many apartment houses, all giving a well-ordered and substantial appearance. The street was neat too—no banana peelings along the curbing, no candy bar wrappers, no pop-corn sacks. Even the twigs that had fallen from the trees had been gathered up, with an unnatural regard for the immaculate.

On a Sunday evening in a third-story apartment, one of the families was eating its supper. The Mother directed a strained comment to her twenty-two-year-old daughter.

"Potatoes, black bread, powdered eggs from the Americans, peas from the Americans—how long is this going to last, Gertrud? When will we have meat again?"

The girl thoughtfully spread a dab of lard on her bread. The bread reeked with garlic. "I think we are perhaps fortunate, Mutti—in the Russian zone they do not even have the powdered eggs and the peas." She handed the bread to her eleven-year-old Brother and he ate it silently.

"Ah, the Russians, don't speak of them!—robbers, plunderers—did you hear what one of them did to this old Grandmother down by the Canal? It is so horrible I—"

The boy interrupted, "Can we have goose again, like we did a long time ago?"

Gertrud looked sorrowfully at her brother. His face looked hollow and thin, his legs were thin—or was it that they just looked thin compared to the high top shoes of his father's. She handed him another piece of bread, one she had intended to eat, and smiled at him. "I think we have goose again sometime, Helmut." Maybe if she worked long enough at the ticket office she could finance a good meal sometime.

Then she remembered the face she had seen in the mirror for the past year, the face of the hunger she had been feeling! She knew they would not have goose for a long time.

III

Two evenings after the session in the Sergeant's room Joe wandered along a street near Währinger Gürtel. He walked inside a ticket office that had been especially set up to help American soldiers obtain tickets for various types of entertainment. A thin, dark-haired girl was seated at her desk back of the counter.

"Ich will zum Oper gehen, Fraulein—"

"Please speak English; I have studied English for nine years at the school—do you want to go to an opera?"

Joe studied her for a moment. She was wearing horn-rimmed glasses, had a thin, rather severe appearing face with prominent cheekbones. "Still not a bad face, though," Joe thought, "but she could use a little more meat on her."

He answered her, "Yes, I'd I'd like to see "Die Fledermaus"—That's on tonight, isn't it?"

"Excuse me?"

"I said 'The Fledermaus'—Isn't that playing tonight?"

"Yes, it is, I have yet tickets in the seventh row. That is at the Volksoper, you know."

"Seventh row?—what does that cost?"

"I think quite a bit—maybe twenty, maybe thirty Schilling." She paused for a moment as if debating whether to say something more. "Have you seen this Opera before?—It is very good." She was surprised at finding another American who was interested in Opera. She smiled sadly, perhaps recalling happier days.

"Yep, I was right," Joe thought to himself triumphantly. "Not bad at all, despite those teeth." He said to her, "No, I haven't, uh—do you know any good native guides?"

"Pardon?"

Joe fidgeted a little. "I mean, how'd you like to go with me to the Opera tonight—versteh?"

The girl again appeared to be thinking very seriously. She looked quickly up at his face and then back at her typewriter. A few embarrassing seconds went by for Joe. She looked up again, "Yes, I will go with you, but I must be home at twelve o'clock."

Joe spoke, "Ok, two tickets in the seventh row," and she smiled again as she pulled out the tickets, this time a more pleasing smile of anticipation. Joe thought her teeth looked a little better this time.

She said, "The bureau should be open until nine o'clock but I think no one misses me. You Americans always find your entertainments some place else I think anyway."

"It begins at nine, doesn't it?—what is your name?"

"Gertrud—Gertrud Fingelsbauer. Yes, it begins at nine."

Joe mused to himself, "Oh, no!—what a corny name!—Gertrud Fingelsbauer—Why couldn't it just be Maria Schmidt or something?" Joe helped her with her coat, "Do you have a middle name?"

"Yes, I do—Lizza Lotta." Joe decided to call her Gertrud as they walked the short distance to the Volksoper.

"Like a good American cigarette?"

"No, I think not," but she looked with interest at the pack that he held in his hand. "We have only a minute's walk."

They walked quietly down the carpeted aisle to take their place in the audience. Joe glanced around, saw one or two American uniforms, saw the most prominent loges filled with stiff-looking Russian officers. He felt conspicuous as a soldier among all these civilians.

As the Opera proceeded, Gertrud excitedly explained to Joe what was happening. Occasionally he glanced at her, letting his eyes fall where soldiers' eyes often fall, carefully weighing her from her knees up to her brown hair.

After the Opera had finished they stood outside of Gertrud's apartment home. She appeared talkative and gay as she smoked one of Joe's good American cigarettes.

"Do you know, Joseph, that I have learn to play the flute when I am ten? My Father did not like it so I quit." She pronounced his name, "Yoseph," but Joe thought he'd straighten that up later.

"Your Father—does he live at home?"

Gertrud looked at the wall a moment, then answered. "The Russians have not return him yet."

Joe persisted, "How old is he?"

"He is forty-seven."

"Forty-seven?—Isn't that a little old for the army?"

"Yes, it is. Do you know this is the first time I have seen this Opera since 1941? I am so happy to go again and I want to thank you, Joseph."

He felt the lump in the pocket of his Eisenhower jacket—the ZagNut candy bar, and he knew that he was going to be very clumsy about this. He pulled it out anyway and handed it to her.

"What is this?" She looked astounded.

"A candy bar." Joe felt very stupid. "Do you want it or not?" He wondered what her act was all about.

She accepted it, squeezed it to see if it were real. "Joseph, since 1942, I have not had a candy bar!" She put it in her pocketbook and looked up so appreciatively that Joe felt embarrassed again.

"Go ahead, eat it!"

"No, I save it for my brother—he needs it more than I. Joe thought, "Oh, no, not her brother too!—do I have to feed him too?—What's she in anyway—the Austrian Salvation Army?" But he pulled out a Ping bar and held it out to her. "Here, now I want to see you eat this—now!"

He laughed as she wolfed down the bar.

"Will I see you tomorrow night?" Joe asked.

"I think you will see me if you come to the ticket office before nine o'clock. Good night, Joseph," and she quickly slipped inside the door.

Joe felt elated as he walked to the street-car stop. But he never would understand women as the Sergeant did. He would have to be very tactful.

IV

The "Rainbow Club" was brightly lighted and the air was humid from the crowd of soldiers and girls, some sitting, some dancing, but all making noise. A local civilian band, accustomed to playing Strauss Waltzes and other sweet, nostalgic music, was having difficulty achieving the "Boogie Beat" that was demanded from them. The drummer appeared ridiculous in his attempt to imitate a frenzied American narcotic drummer. Many couples were drinking the deceptively mild tasting wine.

Joe signaled the waiter for two more drinks and smiled foolishly at Gertrud. "That makes eight for me and five for you, doesn't it, Gertie?"

But Joe was not so drunk as he appeared.

"I think I have too much already, Joe."

"You had just as much last night." He had one eye open and one arm around her neck.

"Yes, I had too much last night, too, and the night before." She drank her glass just the same.

Joe thought the time was ripe now. It had been three weeks ago when he had first seen her at the office. "The softening-up process is just about over," he thought, and he pinched her arm slightly.

"Joe, what are you doing?"

"I'm pinching your arm to feel how soft you are," he stated frankly.

She giggled at his remark and told Joe he was a rascal.

"Gertie, how'd you like to see where I stay—it's only twenty minutes away on the Straszenbahn?"

"Ok, Joe, let's go." She smiled because this was not the English she had learned in school. "Have you got another cigarette?"

On their way out the door the Corporal and the Sergeant spied Joe and the girl. The Corporal winked at Joe very deliberately and Joe felt like ramming his knuckles down the Corporal's mouth.

The Corporal turned to the Sergeant as the couple went out the door, "I got a hundred schillings that says he won't."

The Sergeant replied, "My boy, you have little faith in the human race—I know where they're racing to—you're on." The Sergeant laughed at his own joke.

Joe had cleaned his room that day, had pulled up two chairs to the desk, had purchased two bottles of white wine, had carefully made up his bed.

Gertrud appeared impressed as she walked into his room. "You are good housekeeper, Joe; did you learn that in the Army?"

Joe answered truthfully, "Yea—excuse me a minute," and he walked out of the room with a sense of subdued urgency.

Gertrud peered around his room, saw Joe's barracks bag in one corner—a Nuremburg Stove in the other, saw his shoes lined up neatly under his bed, saw a stack of books on the desk—she even saw a Bible there.

Joe came back in the room, carrying two bottles and some glasses. He appeared to clink with every step.

"Wine, Women and Song, Gertie—I'm going to sing for you," and he sang portions of "The Blue Danube" with a resonating, wine-keg voice.

She laughed at the ridiculous noises he made and drank the wine that he offered to her. He had both arms around her now. Joe and the girl both sang "The Blue Danube," followed by many other songs.

Finally, "Joe, I'm tired, will you take me home?"

Joe knew now was the time—now or never—he'd never

have the courage again. "Come look at yourself in the mirror, Gertie."

She got up and wobbled over to the mirror, tried to focus on what she saw. Her head shifted back and forth—she saw that.

"Joe, I think I'd better lie down a little, ok?"

Joe nodded and she flopped down on his bed. He turned out the light but she didn't notice. He wondered if he should take his boots off, but he decided not to ask Gertrud.

He removed his boots quickly and climbed into bed.

Gertrud opened her eyes for a second, gave Joe a silly, drunken smile, closed her eyes again, not realizing where she was. Then she opened her eyes again—this time there was no doubt where she was—. The flat of her hand connected squarely with Joe's cheek in a cracking sound, and Joe jerked back out of bed.

Collecting her senses, she shouted, "I am not so drunk as that, you— you— American soldier—I can get home by myself," and she stumbled out the door.

Joe felt very embarrassed and frustrated from his sitting position on the floor. "Damned bag!" He knew that the Sergeant wouldn't have flubbed like this. "Salvation Army bag!"

He slowly put his boots back on and made a quickly-retreating, red-faced smile. "Maybe I should have kept my combat boots on."

Joe took a long walk that night. He decided that he had done it all wrong.

V

Two days later Joe stood outside the ticket office a little before nine o'clock, wondering whether to enter. Hadn't he sent her a note explaining how sorry he was? Hadn't he explained that he acted differently when he was drunk and that he wouldn't drink so much again? Wouldn't she understand that? He opened the door quietly and observed her typing out a form—She looked the same.

"Hello, Gertrud."

She looked up from her typewriter. "Oh, you—why do

not you stay in your room?" Then she added, "Do you want to go to the Opera?"

Joe felt that he had lost already, but he was going through with this. "I just wanted to tell you I'm sorry, Gertie. You know what war does to a guy."

She looked at his well-fed body and wanted to tell him that the war wasn't over for the Austrians.

He continued, "I never had any idea your wine was so strong—aw c'mon, Gertie, smile a little, won't you?"

She smiled a little and said, "All I wanted to see was your room, Joseph."

Joe thought she had a pretty sharp tongue. "Ok, ok, you win—what do I hafta do to apologize to you?"

"You go back to your room and sit in the corner," and she returned to her typing.

"What do you say that we go have a good meal, Gertie?" Again she looked up. Where?"

"Oh, I talked the mess Sergeant out of some food—you know—meat, bread and butter—even got some canned milk to go with the coffee. Just the same old stuff."

After pausing a little she spoke again, "Maybe I should excuse too for becoming so drunk, Joe, ok?"

"How about the meal?"

"I am a little hungry."

Again the same room, the two chairs by the desk, the barracks bag in the one corner, the stove in the other corner, the neatly made bed hovering over a straightened line of polished footwear. Joe was trying to fry the meat on the hearth of the stove.

"Say, Gertie, I'm not much good at this sort of thing, would you help me a minute?"

She walked over and peered in the stove. "Maria!—where did you fetch those great steaks?"

"Just like I say—from the Mess Sergeant. Oh, we don't have steak every day, maybe twice a week if we're lucky. The officers get most of the steak, you know—the rest of the time we have hamburger, perhaps pork chops—once in a while some lousy liver and onions—oh yes—and Spam."

Gertrud couldn't take here eyes from the meat. "You make the table ready, Joe, and I'll fry the meat."

Three-quarters of an hour later, "Joe, I think I can not finish this meat. I have tried."

"It doesn't matter, we can just chuck it in the fire."

"What?"

Joe then realized his mistake. "Oh, I'm sorry—I forgot. Why don't you take it home with you?" Then he added, "Take the bread too; there's almost a half loaf left."

Gertrud was sitting there with a dumbfounded look on her face.

Joe continued as he walked over to his drawer of rations. "How about some old K Rations? They're old, but waterproof. You won't like the cheese in the dinner ration or the meat in the supper ration, but the canned egg loaf is pretty good in the morning ration—that's the green box."

Gertrud still said nothing. She only stared at the stack of food that Joe was piling in front of her.

"But those crackers—oh, my G. I. back!—they're horrible—and that soluble coffee and that soluble orange and lemon juice powder—you can hardly drink the stuff. You can use the boullion powder for salt like we do. But wait till you taste that fruit bar in the green box—I'll never know how they figured out the lousy food to put in those boxes. Wait just a second; I'll get a sack."

As Joe left the room Gertrud touched the boxes, almost reverently, then she lifted the stack. "There's enough in there to help feed us for a month. I could eat it all myself—but Helmut and poor Mutti—won't they be happy when I bring this home! I think Joe had to sacrifice much to get these."

Joe walked back in the room. "Oh, I forgot, here's a can of peanuts that was laying around, and would you like a couple cartons of Luckies?"

She touched Joe's arm, "What can I do to repay you, Joe?"

Joe smiled strangely at that question. "Don't thank me, thank the Army—there's plenty more where that came from. This is nothing compared to the States. How would you like to go to America sometime?"

"You're making joke of me."

"Naw, I wouldn't kid you, baby." He gathered her in

with his left arm and tightened his hold on her with his right. "I wouldn't kid you."

Gertrud repeated to herself, "A whole month! Won't they be surprised to see all this food!"

A little later that evening the lights were out. A prone soldier remarked once again, "I wouldn't kid you, Gertie."

VI

The next night Joe pretended confidence as he settled back in the chair, his back touching the wall. The four occupants of the house were again in the Sergeant's room.

"Well, how did you make out, Joe?" asked Sergeant Blitsch. The Sergeant had collected a hundred schillings from the Corporal.

Joe feigned an air of assurance. "Oh, not so bad—Ya never know 'till you try, do ya, Sarg?" but Joe looked at the soldier with the high-pitched voice.

The Sergeant nodded seriously, "That's right, never know till you try." He had his stockings off again and was clipping his toe nails.

The Corporal got up to shake hands with Joe. "Congratulations!—never though you'd make it." Joe had the sudden urge to flatten the Corporal's nose, but he said nothing. All of them shook hands with Joe.

The Corporal spoke again, "How many packs did it take, Joe?" He grinned, showing all his teeth, "—or did she just like your wavy hair?"

Joe grew hot, "How'd you like to ask her?"

"Didn't mean anything, Joe, just kiddin' you a little."

A high nasal voice said, "No kiddin' Joe, this Vienna stuff is pretty good, ain't it?"

The Sergeant took over. "Take it easy, boys, this is Joe's first time, ain'tcha got any feelings?"

The Sergeant continued. "Don't think I ever told you boys about my first time. I was only fifteen years old and workin' on the old man's farm. Well, on the next farm there was this babe, about eighteen, I think. Well, one day I'm working down near the fence and up drives this babe on the tractor—"

Joe couldn't take any more. He slipped out of the Sergeant's room and wandered back to his room, a very confused soldier. He could hear the laughter of the Corporal booming loudly as the Sergeant reached the climax of the story. As he closed his door he heard a peal of high-pitched laughter.

In the dark he shuffled over to his drawer of rations, flung it open and looked at his depleted stock of ammunition. He crushed a carton of cigarettes in his hand and began to cry. "My God! What have I done!

God didn't answer.

—James Kress, M.E., Sr.



CHOICE

The loneliness of individuality is powerful and its company is rare, elusive prey.

Darkness falls against it and settles deep in experience shared through self and self alone.

Emptiness and sadness move to change a will that recognizes no change through choice—and the inner-self is torn by desires of expression and recognition pitted against an endless hermitage.

Conformity beckons to the dwellers of the outer fringe who hesitate, and then move—or stand resolute.

But those who stand and those who move are disappointed with their choice, and the sadness and the loneliness remain.

— John Chatellier, Ag. So.